

ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S

mystery magazine

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After tying up loose ends, one may find himself with another ball of twine.

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THE VIOLET BUSINESS

by Jack Ritchie

WHO IS IT you want killed?" I asked.

"Me," Ralph Lynch said.

Ah, I thought, *another one of those*. I said, "It is not necessary that I know why you want to die, but perhaps you could satisfy my curiosity?"

"I'm deeply in debt. My insurance would cover that, and also there would be enough left over to provide comfortably for my wife and two children."

"Are you positive this is the only solution?"

He nodded. Ralph Lynch was an intense man in his early thirties.

"Are you a good shot?" he asked.

"Excellent."

"I would like to be shot through the heart."

"A wise choice," I said, "and

neat. Most people prefer the open-coffin viewing. A closed coffin can lead to so much rumor and wild imagining. Do you have any particular time in mind?"

"Yes. Between twelve noon and one o'clock would be ideal." He explained further. "I am an accoun-

tant at the Bayfield Savings and Loan Association. Twelve to one is our normal lunch hour, except that on Fridays I am officer of the deck, so to speak. At that time only I and Miss Pendell will be in the office."

"You want the girl as a witness?"

"Yes. I feel that if I am killed without a witness, there might possibly be some doubt about how I died, and that might lead to some complications with the insurance."

"I walk into the office at approximately 12:30 on Friday and I shoot you?"

"Through the heart," he said again. "I thought we could make it look like a holdup."

"There is the question of payment."

"Of course. How much will that be?"

"I tried a figure. 'Ten thousand.' He frowned thoughtfully, 'I'll



pay you five thousand down and the rest after . . .” He stopped.

I smiled. “Obviously there will be no ‘after’.”

He conceded that, but still he was not a man to pay in full for a service before it had been rendered. “We’ll do it this way. I’ll pay you five thousand now and I’ll put the rest into an envelope and leave it on the counter at the office. After you shoot me, you may take the envelope and leave.”

“How can I be positive that you haven’t filled the envelope with newspaper strips or something of the sort?”

“You may look into the envelope first and *then* shoot me.”

It seemed reasonable. “In view of the fact that you are almost bankrupt, how did you manage to get together the ten thousand dollars?”

“I embezzled it from the firm during the last two months.” He studied me. “Tell me, do you get people like me often?”

“Not too often.”

As a matter of fact, during the course of my career, I had handled only four cases such as Lynch’s, three of them to my satisfaction.

The exception had been Elmo Peterson.

Elmo had been a mathematics instructor in a high school in this city. He had fallen desperately in love with a Miss Stevens, who taught

home economics. Unfortunately, Miss Stevens did not return his passion and chose instead to marry a member of the school board.

Elmo had manfully attended the church wedding, but immediately thereafter had taken a long walk which eventually culminated in a waterfront bar where he had met Julius Farrow, one of my agents. After four whiskey sours, Elmo had confided to Julius that he wished sincerely to die, though he did balk at doing the job himself.

Julius had passed him on to me.

“I suppose some people change their minds about dying after they’ve hired you?” Lynch asked.

“Yes.”

“But once you’ve been paid to kill a man, you cannot be dissuaded? No matter how they plead or beg?”

I smiled.

“I will not plead for my life,” Lynch said firmly.

“But will you run away?”

“No. I will *not* run away.”

But Elmo Peterson had. I still regarded him as unfinished business, a loose thread that waited to be gathered in.

Lynch removed a fat envelope from his pocket and counted out five thousand dollars in one hundred dollar bills. “Just drive into Bayfield, shoot me, and drive out. It shouldn’t take more than ten min-

utes. And remember, through the heart."

When he was gone, I locked the door. I moved to the door adjoining the next suite and unlocked that.

When I meet with prospective clients, I always make it a practice to rent two adjoining rooms or suites. It is a precaution taken on the remote possibility that someone might be waiting to follow me.

Inside the second suite, I removed the Vandyke beard which I had been wearing, the green-tinted sunglasses, and the light-haired wig.

I stuffed the items, together with my shirt and suit coat, into the compartments of my golf bag.

I slipped into a sports shirt, adjusted a billed cap, and shouldered the golf bag.

When I left, I was simply someone going off for a round of golf.

As I reached the hotel parking lot, I observed Lynch driving off in a light blue sedan. I made a mental note of the license number.

I drove to the Binnacle Bar on Casey Street where I was to keep my appointment with Julius Farrow.

I have a number of agents—I really prefer to call them associates—scattered about the country. When one of them isolates a prospective customer, he inserts an ad in the Lost and Found section of his principal local newspaper: *Lost*.

Brown and white collie. Answers to name of Violet. Reward, and includes his telephone number.

Through the years my associates and I have enjoyed amicable relations, with only minor difficulties, principally the finding of good homes for thirteen collies named Violet.

Superficially at least, I am no different from my neighbors, except that I subscribe to seventeen American and two Canadian newspapers.

Julius Farrow possesses a quite genuine graying beard and the quiet eye of the listener. He invariably wears a pea jacket and the visored cap of a merchant marine skipper. One might reason that he has spent a lifetime upon the water; however, he is in truth a retired bookkeeper on Social Security.

He lives in a suburb, but every afternoon after lunch, he dons his uniform and drives carefully to the city and the ocean. He spends his time wandering about the waterfront and its bars, listening to the sea talk, occasionally treating, and in general becoming at least a fringe of the maritime life which he had foregone for early marriage and five children. He returns to the room in his son-in-law's house before nightfall.

I found him at a scarred wooden table nursing a beer.

"How much did you get?" he

asked. "You bring it with you?"

"He gave me five thousand in advance." I opened the envelope underneath the table and counted out two thousand dollars.

I pay my agents a forty percent commission. I suppose some people might consider this too high, but I feel that my associates do fully as much work, if not more, on the prospects as I do.

Julius Farrow is one of my new men. So far he has sent me only two clients: Elmo Peterson and now Ralph Lynch.

He folded the bills and slipped them into a pocket of his pea jacket.

"How did you happen to find Lynch?" I asked.

"Actually he seemed to find me. I was sitting here reading the afternoon newspaper when he came in and got a beer from the bar. He took a seat at the table next to me. When he finished the beer, he looked over at me and said, 'What'll you have?' So I said beer. He got two of them and sat down at my table. It didn't take him long to get around to telling me his troubles and what he thought could be done about them."

"Did he know your name?"

"No, and I never gave it."

"But he came to you and almost immediately began talking about his problems?"

Farrow nodded slowly. "Come to think of it, he did all the leading."

We thought about that for a while and then I said, "You're positive that you've never told anybody about our business relationship?"

"I swear," Julius said firmly. "A captain's oath. Nobody in the world knew about the connection between us. Except Elmo Peterson, of course."

Peterson? Was it possible that Lynch had sought out Farrow through Peterson?

My associates never give their real names or addresses to the clients, but still Peterson might have possessed enough information to help Lynch find Farrow.

There was Farrow's uniform, his beard, the fact that he frequented the waterfront—and now that I noticed it, the small star-shaped scar above Farrow's right eyebrow.

Yes, someone wanting to find Farrow would not have had too difficult a job.

Very well, I thought, suppose that Lynch made the connection through Peterson, what difference did that make?

"Julius," I said, "I don't think you'd better spend any of that money just yet. At least not until I give you the word."

He seemed to be reading my mind. "You think maybe it's marked, or the police have the se-

rial numbers?" He smiled faintly and sadly. "I hope we don't have to throw it away."

So did I.

The next day I drove to Bayfield, Ralph Lynch's town, a trip of some two hundred miles, and arrived there a little after two.

Bayfield seemed to be a farm town, with most of its businesses on Main Street. A sign at the town limits indicated it had a population of 2,314.

I parked my car and entered a drugstore. I went to the phone booth and riffled through the town's directory. The yellow pages—twenty-two of them—indicated that among other things, Bayfield boasted three doctors, one chiropractor, two dentists, six taverns, four churches, one savings and loan, and four attorneys.

I noticed that one of the attorneys was Ralph Lynch. I gave that a little thought. Lynch had said that he was an accountant at the Bayfield Savings and Loan. Could he be an accountant and practice law too?

Turning to the white pages, I discovered there were three Petersons in town. None of them, however, had the first name of Elmo.

I left the drugstore and strolled slowly down Main Street. I stopped at a barber shop and studied the election posters.

It appeared that Ralph Lynch was also running for district attorney.

I sighed and walked past the Bayside Savings and Loan office. There appeared to be three or four clerks and half a dozen customers inside. I did not see Lynch, but he could have been in an inner office.

I turned into the nearest bar. It was a cool, quiet place with two men in overalls and jackets at the bar talking to the proprietor.

I ordered a bottle of beer and sat at one end of the bar, drinking and listening. I learned that dairying doesn't pay anymore and that with the price of hogs at \$21.50 per hundredweight, you might as well go out of that business too.

When they finished their beers, the two men left.

The bartender wiped the bar and edged my way, ready for conversation. "Stranger in town?"

I reflected that he could not possibly know every one of Bayfield's 2,314 population, and yet I was marked as a stranger in town. Probably because at this time of the day anybody who wore a business suit would be working, and obviously I wasn't.

During the consumption of three more beers—one of which was on the house—I learned, among other things, that Ralph Lynch, a bachelor, was running for district at-

torney, but it was an uphill fight because his opponent came from the county seat which had a population of over eight thousand, and people tended to vote for home-town boys. I also learned that Police Chief Dakin's wife was Clara Lynch, Ralph's oldest sister, and that his younger sister, Amy, had just married the new math teacher at the high school.

And who was the new math teacher?

Fellow by the name of Wilson. Jerome Wilson.

I left the bar at quarter to three and walked back to my car. I had no difficulty finding the Bayfield High School. I parked near the new building and watched the school buses lining up, waiting for their charges.

At ten after three, bells inside the building were audible. Thirty seconds later, students streamed out of the building, the majority of them heading for the buses.

Most of the buses had filled and departed before the first of the teachers began leaving the building.

I waited and finally saw Elmo Peterson, or as he now evidently preferred to be known, Jerome Wilson. He was tall, slightly stooped, and in his late twenties.

I watched him go to his car. If he noticed me at all, it didn't matter. The only time we had met, I had

worn the Vandyke, the sunglasses, and the wig.

In Peterson's case, I had contracted to kill him for three thousand dollars in advance, which, being a schoolteacher, was all he was able to muster.

No specific time had been mentioned for his demise—he preferred not to know when it was coming—except that it should take place within the week.

When I went looking for him, three days later, he had disappeared.

I learned later, by reconstruction, that within twenty-four hours of seeing me, Peterson had decided that life was still sweet, though not overly, and he did not want to die.

He had rushed back to the hotel where I had met him, but I was, of course, gone. I believe in a certain immediate mobility.

From there he had returned to the bar where he had first encountered Julius Farrow—but Julius had left that morning for an upstate visit to some of his grandchildren and so was not to be found.

Peterson panicked, packed his suitcase, and disappeared.

I watched Peterson-Wilson now as he got into his car and pulled away. I followed.

Six blocks later, he pulled up to the curb before a large mid-Victorian residence. He left the car and

promptly entered the building.
As I drove past, I made a note of the address. I also noticed Ralph Lynch's light blue sedan parked directly in front of Peterson's car.

That brought my mind back to Lynch.

He had lied to me about being married and having two children. What was the point in that? To make his motive stronger for having himself killed?

What the hell was he really up to?

I turned back to Main Street and parked behind what appeared to be Bayfield's only hotel. I registered and took my suitcase and golf bag up to my room.

The next morning, Friday, I had a late breakfast and took another stroll down Main Street. I passed a heavy man in a police uniform. From his age and demeanor, I guessed that he would be Police Chief Dakin.

I walked up the steps and into the town library. I found a book and settled down at a table near a window facing Main Street. From here I could get a clear view of the Bayfield Savings and Loan building.

At ten after eleven, I saw Chief Dakin again—this time entering the Savings and Loan office.

I waited.

He did not leave it.

Eleven-thirty, twelve, twelve-

thirty. He still hadn't come out.

At one o'clock, Ralph Lynch came out of the Savings and Loan building. He looked up the street. He looked down the street. He checked his watch and went back inside.

Still I waited, curious about Chief Dakin. Would he ever come out?

At quarter to two I gave up. It was time to leave town. I put the book back in its place on the shelf and walked back to the hotel.

When I opened the door to my room, Chief Dakin was waiting with his revolver in his hand.

He smiled. "So you decided not to show up at the Savings and Loan?"

For what it was worth, I became innocence personified. "Show up? Show up for what?"

He moved forward and patted me down, but he didn't find a weapon.

I noticed that he had gone through my suitcase and also the golf bag. My Vandyke beard, the sunglasses, and my wig lay on the bed.

He holstered his revolver. "When you didn't keep the appointment, I got to wondering why. Here was this five thousand dollars just waiting to be picked up and you didn't come for it. Why not?"

I said nothing.

"You got suspicious about the setup?" He grinned. "Lynch is wearing a bulletproof vest. After you shot him he was supposed to drop to the floor pretending he's dead. Then I speak up from where I'm hidden and tell you to drop the gun or I'll blow your head off."

So it had been a trap after all.

Dakin proceeded to fill me in further. "The whole thing started with Jerome Wilson. Or maybe I'd better call him Elmo Peterson. One night back about a month ago, the three of us, Peterson, Lynch, and me, were celebrating the fact that Peterson was about to become a relative by marriage. Peterson isn't used to the stuff, so after a while the whole story came out; about him hiring you to kill him and how he had to run away to save his life. He thinks you're probably still gunning for him."

Dakin smiled again. "That gave Lynch an idea. He's running for DA and he needs help to win this election. He figured that getting credit for risking his life in order to break up a murder syndicate is more than enough to sell him to the voters. So he came up with this little plan."

Dakin removed what seemed to be a celebratory cigar from the inside pocket of his uniform. "Yes, sir, like I said, while I waited over at the Savings and Loan, I thought to myself maybe you got suspicious

and just passed up the whole deal. But what made you suspicious? Suppose you checked into town last night and did some asking and looking around this morning and didn't like what you heard or saw. Did that make you leave town? Or maybe you were still here, watching to see if it's a trap?"

Dakin lit the cigar. "I picked up the phone and got Cecil here at the hotel—he's the desk clerk—and asked him whether there was anybody registered he'd never seen before. He came up with you and you hadn't checked out yet. So I left the Savings and Loan by the back door and worked my way around to the hotel. I let myself into your room and did some searching." He indicated the things he'd taken from the golf bag. "I guess if you put those things on, you'd fit the description Lynch gave me of you."

I sighed. Because I was about to go to jail for murder? No. Jail perhaps, but not for murder.

The simple truth is that my associates and I are frauds. We have never killed anyone, anywhere, at any time.

We accepted the money to do so, of course, but then we disappeared without doing the job. Not, however, without sending the intended victim an anonymous note informing him that someone was anxious to see him dead and naming names.

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MAGAZINE

This alerted the victim, if nothing else.

Also, we sent another note to the police with the same information. I doubt very much whether this ever resulted in any arrests, since solid proof and witnesses were lacking. However, I do believe that the simple police check-out interview of my clients sufficiently frightened them so that thereafter they abandoned any further murder plans.

In short, we saved lives, and made a rather nice profit doing so.

We have never had any complaints from our clients. After all, a man who hires me to kill someone does not go to the police because I fail to fulfill the murder contract.

In the self-destruction cases, such as Lynch's and Peterson's, I always allowed several days to elapse before I sought them out. Invariably I found that they had changed their minds about dying and so I "allowed" them to live, for which they were so grateful that none of them had ever requested refunds.

I had not come to Bayfield with the intention of shooting Lynch and

thereby picking up the five thousand dollars.

I had come here for what had been basically an errand of mercy. I suspected that Peterson might be in Bayfield or the vicinity, and I had intended to find him and inform him that I had given up the intention of killing him.

Chief Dakin slowly puffed the cigar. "Yes, sir, I did some heavy thinking while I was waiting."

He studied me while thirty seconds passed.

"Nobody knows I'm here," he said. "Not even Lynch."

I frowned, trying to figure out the reason for that.

Thirty more seconds passed.

Finally he seemed to make up his mind. "It's my damn wife. I can't stand living with her any longer and she won't give me a divorce." He leaned forward. "I got four thousand dollars in the bank and I'm willing to give it to *anybody* who can come up with a *solution* to my problem."

I stared at him. Then I relaxed.

I had another customer.

